Prelude to Something

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Prelude to Something

by cerise

Summary

Prodigy isn't necessarily an aphrodisiac to someone who doesn't know a concerto from a sonata, but Ephram's determined to teach Bright all about the universal language.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

I. ***Pianissimo***

Bright lies flat on his back in the garage, by turns cursing and cheering at his GameBoy. Ephram does his level best to focus all of his concentration on the metronome and tune out the clicking and huffing going on behind him. It lasts for all of twenty four measures before he stops abruptly and turns to gaze down at Bright.

"You're driving me crazy."

"Dude, I'm not making a sound!" Bright says, sitting up in protest.

"That doesn't mean I can't still hear you," Ephram shrugs. "I need every ounce of concentration I've got, you know? Maybe you don't understand, but -"

"Sure, I do." Bright scoots closer until his back is against the piano stool leg. "Football's like that. You've got a 'big game' coming up." He has the nerve to make airquotes. "I get it. When are the next auditions?"

"I can't believe you just used a football metaphor for a Chopin concerto successfully. And they're in December."

"You think you'll be ready by then?" Ephram can tell Bright doesn't give a shit about anything he's doing with the piano, but he's trying hard to pretend, so Ephram sighs. It's the thought the counts.

"Probably not."

"Then why are you doing this to yourself?" Bright shakes his head. "Why not be out macking on Amy or something? That can't be any more boring and disgusting than pissing away the last days of summer in your damn garage."

"You wouldn't understand."

"I'm tryin', man. It's like - I get the whole delayed gratification aspect. You work hard now, and the payoff is later. But the payoff is getting into Julliard, and going back to New York. Maybe permanently. And I don't know. I thought you were past that."

"Getting into Julliard has -"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Been your dream since you can remember." Bright meets his gaze, something like a challenge, and says, "I'm just

sayin'. Maybe it's time to start thinking about everything that dream really means. How it's all gonna play out if you get what you think you want."

Damn, Ephram thinks. That's almost deep.

II. ***Staccato***

Bright's become used to the notes halting abruptly and Ephram's chatter picking up where his piano left off. "Why do you hang around here if you think the piano is so boring?" he blurts out, sounding dangerously close to defensive.

"I dunno," Bright says, not taking his eyes off the latest issue of *Entertainment Weekly*. "It's like, why do you come over and watch me play basketball? You're a weirdo, dude. I figure, this is the closest to male bonding we're ever gonna get."

Ephram accepts this, if grudgingly.

III. ***Andante***

"It all sounds like the same shit to me," Bright admits, sounding almost gentle, like he doesn't want to hurt Ephram's feelings. "Tinkle, tinkle. Blah, blah, blah. Whatever." Ephram grins, touching the ivories lightly with one hand.

"Sit here," he says, making a little more room on the bench. "Let me show you something."

Bright cocks his head, but plunks himself onto the space next to Ephram. An act of faith. "The piano is more than a musical instrument," Ephram begins, and elbows him in the ribs when he sees Bright roll his eyes. "Listen up, moron. You might actually learn something."

"Thank God," Bright mutters. "Because I miss school *so damn much.*"

"It's not the same," Ephram goes on, ignoring him. "Every piece of music, every note that I play, says different things. Listen to this." He plays the first few measures of *Flight of the Bumblebee,* and stops when he fumbles over an embellishment. A snuck glance at Bright tells him he's the only one who noticed. "What's that sound like to you?"

"Is this like the musical equivalent of seeing clowns and bunnies while looking at clouds?"

"Yeah. Now answer the question, dammit."

Bright sighs. "A high speed chase in one of your shitty foreign movies. Y'know, I actually think I've heard that on Looney Tunes."

"I believe you. Most of us got introduced to classical music through Bugs Bunny," Ephram nods. "It's where I first heard *The Marriage of Figaro*, and that's one of my favorites now."

"And, see, that's another problem," Bright interrupts, irritated. "Most of this shit is in a whole other language. It's like they do it on purpose to confuse you."

Ephram blinks. "It's not Beethoven's fault he was German, Bright."

"Look, I'm not racist or anything. But can't people just translate?"

Ephram decides to ignore that. Despite the obvious setbacks, he feels like he's crossing boundaries here. He's going where no idea has gone before. "Fine. So, okay, that sounds like a high-speed chase. What's this sound like?" He plays the first sixteen bars of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21*, figuring it's best to stick with classics. "You've probably heard that on, uh. I don't know. A maxi pad commercial or something," he supplies helpfully.

"Dude, gross," Bright says, but pauses to think. "I don't know. Okay, fine, it sounds like a maxi pad commercial. You know, where the chick's dressed all in white and playing tennis in a meadow..."

"Whatever. Really different from the first one, right? See how they are so not the same?"

"I guess," Bright admits, but Ephram sees a glimmer of understanding there and presses on.

"And this?" He plays a little of "Ain't Misbehavin'," with the variation Will's taught him, and nods at tempo. He finishes with a little flair and smirks at Bright.

"Kind of..." Bright bites back what he's going to say, and so of course Ephram has to ask, "Kind of what?"

"Well, don't take this the wrong way," Bright says slowly. "But I was

gonna say 'sexy.' You can just tell it's about somebody trying to get some."

Ephram bounces a little on the bench. "Damn straight, it's sexy. Listen to the verse, where it builds and builds and then goes up-" he plays the verse again, with emphasis on the part going up the scale - "hear that? That's someone begging. It's saying, please believe me, baby. Yours are the only pants I want to get into. Then it's like -" he plays the refrain, posture relaxing visibly -"he's saying: you know it. I know it. Now stop being stupid, and let's make out."

"It says all that?"

Ephram nods. "It says all that, and then some."

Bright cocks his head. "So, lemme get this straight. This whole time I'm thinking you can't shut up for one freaking second, except for when you play the piano. I'm figuring, the piano must be when you give your brain a rest for a few minutes out of your day. But now you're telling me, you love this because it's just another way of talking." He nudges Ephram and grins. "Dude. My mind is blown."

Ephram laughs so hard at that, he nearly falls right off the bench. Bright grabs his arm to keep him steady, working off pure reflex, and only loosens his grip when he sees Ephram wince. "Sorry, dude. You okay?"

Ephram nods, the tiniest hint of a smirk forming as he rubs his upper arm where moments earlier Bright's fingers were digging in. "It's not like I *need* that arm or anything."

"Sorry," Bright says again, softer this time.

Ephram stares so hard and so long at him that Bright starts to squirm under the scrutiny.

Then, without another word, he sighs and goes back to his lightning speed arpeggios.

IV. ***Sforzando***

"What the hell is this?" Ephram says, his whole expression shifting imperceptibly when Bright hits "play" on his truck's CD player.

"It's Duke Ellington." Bright rolls his eyes, sounding entirely too

pleased with himself. Smug, even. "I can't believe you didn't know that. You're totally fired from the world of music geekery."

"I know it's Duke Ellington, dumbass," Ephram sputters, still incredulous. "But what's it doing in your car? Did you mug a lounge singer?"

"Well, this may sound hard to believe, but I actually went into a store and bought it," Bright scoffs. "They had it right there in the jazz section! Who knew they had a whole section dedicated to old shit like that there?"

Ephram doesn't say that everyone knows. He just listens to The Duke, taps happily in rhythm on the armrest. "What, pray tell, brought this act of lunacy on? Were you drunk?"

Bright shrugs. Ephram tries hard to not notice that he blushes, ever so briefly, in response. "Maybe I wanted to see what else it has to say."

Well, I'm so mad about him,
I can't live without him,
Never treats me sweet and gentle
The way he should;
I've got it bad,
And that ain't good.

Ephram smiles and turns it up.

V. ***Allegro Non Troppo***

"You look beat, man," Bright observes from a corner of the newly renovated garage.

Ephram nods, still gathering his strength. "That was Schumann's Concerto in A minor. It's not a technically complex piece, but it takes a lot out of you."

"Cause it's so fucking long?"

Ephram starts to respond, but just says, "Yeah. Cause it's so fucking long."

"I like the other stuff you play better."

"What, the jazz stuff?"

Bright shrugs. "The stuff that sounds like it was written in the last century."

"It *was* written in the last century, Bright."

"There you go. I'm, like, developing instincts for this."

"Um. Sure. Hand me that songbook over there, will you?" Ephram points to a pile of sheet music and large softcover books. "The one with the blue cover."

Bright tosses it over to him and plunks down on the bench. He notices the odd look Ephram gives him, and just shrugs. "What? You're going to entertain me now, right?" Ephram just sighs and flips to the appropriate page.

"'Prelude to a Kiss?" Bright reads the bold print, then perks up. "Hey. Duke Ellington wrote that!"

"Just shut up and appreciate." Ephram starts on the meandering intro, not taking his eyes off the music, so Bright leans in to read the lyrics better.

If you hear
A song in blue
Like a flower crying
For the dew
That was my heart serenading you
My prelude to a kiss.

"It's so corny," Bright starts to whisper, but Ephram's "Sshhhhhhhh" cuts him off. It's a song he hasn't really played very often, but after the first verse, the chorus and the bridge, Ephram can play it without looking. So he plays, and just thinks about the way the faint smell of Bright's cologne combines with the lingering scent of sawdust and new rubber, and then - he doesn't have to think anymore. Just lets the piano do all the thinking and talking for him. He thinks that's the part Bright wouldn't understand, but then again, he's learned it isn't always wise to underestimate Bright.

He doesn't end with any kind of emphasis, just barely touches the last arpeggio, and stares off onto a far point on the wall. It takes him a few seconds to notice Bright breathing lightly, eyes wide and fixed on his face.

"So," Bright says, his voice hoarse. "What's that song saying?"

Ephram closes the book in front of him, letting it tumble to the ground. "I think it's saying, 'Say goodbye to sanity.'" And he closes the distance between them and kisses him, and he thinks he should be surprised that Bright kisses him back, light and eager on an exhalation, but he's not surprised at all.

VI. ***Appassionato***

"Franz Liszt was the Justin Timberlake of his day," Ephram murmurs to Bright. He tackles the middle of the second movement of the *Concerto Pathetique* with nothing like enthusiasm. "He had so many women he couldn't keep track of them. Eventually people kept showing up and claiming to be his illegitimate kids. He was one of the first people to ever get fan mail. The first teen heartthrob."

"No way," Bright says. "I've seen his picture on your CDs. He was totally gay."

"Hey, fuck you, too," Ephram says, gaze not wavering, and grins.

Bright grins back, studying Ephram's profile as he plays. "Your nose is weird looking, did you know that?"

"It's a Jewish nose, you racist," Ephram says, utterly without malice. "It's not my fault I don't have your chiseled WASP good looks."

"WASP? Doesn't that stand for White Anglo-Saxon *Protestant*?"

"Yeah? So?" He flips a page and sighs, keeps playing, only half his attention on the notes now.

"So, I'm *Catholic*. I'm a... a WASC."

"Franz Liszt was a Lutheran."

"I was dying to know that, thanks."

"Eh, all you people look the same to me," Ephram quips, fumbling on the tempo on the bridge. Bright tugs on Ephram's jersey experimentally, expression questioning, but Ephram just shrugs him off.

"I have to practice."

"Maybe I should stop coming over," Bright says, suddenly sounding

very resolute. "I mean, you don't let anyone else come in here when you practice. I should probably get a clue and figure out where I'm not wanted, right?"

"Shut up, Bright," Ephram says flatly, turning another page. "Don't be stupid."

As his only answer, Bright slips his hand under Ephram's jersey, pressing his palm against the bare skin of the small of his back. Ephram gives up playing altogether then, and just lets his hands drop to his side.

"Bright, I really need to practice. Really. I'm not kidding."

Bright doesn't move his hand. "I dunno, I hear what you're playing, and it's telling me, 'I know it, you know it, now stop being stupid and let's make out,'" Bright says playfully against Ephram's lips, hand snaking its way higher up his back.

"Liszt says all that?" Ephram breathed, mouth grazing Bright's mouth lightly. "Who knew?"

"Sure," Bright says, inhaling slowly. "How do you think he got all those chicks?"

When Bright kisses him this time, Ephram's whole being feels ready with humming, and without thinking, he presses a palm flat against Bright's thigh as Bright pulls him closer.

It's just a simple melody, with nothing fancy, nothing much. A Schubert tune with a Gershwin touch.

VII. ***Cadenza***

Ephram doesn't like to think about why or how his father built him this studio. Any time he starts to think about the kind of expense this must have entailed, his brain nearly flat-lines at the thought of all those zeros. Better to just appreciate it for what it was.

The egg carton foam strips on the walls are meticulously placed, perfect in their symmetry against the asymmetrical garage walls. They look like they're fighting the architecture, Amy had once remarked, and that's what Ephram thinks of whenever he looks at them.

Ephram locks the door behind them and gives Bright a light shove into a foam-covered area on the wall, kissing him with open-mouthed urgency. When his fingers shove their way down Bright's sweats and wrap themselves around Bright's cock, he's amused at the way Bright almost jumps out of his skin, and smiles against Bright's mouth as best as he can.

Ephram's jeans soon pool around his ankles, and he rubs himself against Bright's abdomen languidly and jerks Bright off in time with one hand. Bright hangs on to his hip, like he's afraid he'll lose his balance, and moans and pushes his tongue further into Ephram's mouth as reciprocity.

That day, Ephram learns that when Bright's having an orgasm, he tends to remember religion. Very, very loudly. And then he learns that when getting a blow job, even a kind of a sloppy (if well-intentioned and highly enthusiastic) one, on a piano bench, you should make sure the lip of the piano is down, otherwise your elbows are going to make for terrible clashing dissonance on the keys, in what was supposed to be a moment of unadulterated ecstasy. He also learns, unsurprisingly, that just the sight of Bright on his knees between his legs makes up for all the dissonance in the world.

Ephram's pretty sure this isn't the kind of practice his father had had in mind when he cleaned out the Gold Card for this place.

Well, a pianist *does* need very, very deft fingers, after all.

VIII. ***Coda***

Nina, God bless her, doesn't ask why it takes Ephram a full ten minutes to answer the knocking on the door, or why he's flushed and running fingers nervously through sweaty hair when he does.

"I got a little preoccupied. With... the practice session," Ephram explains, even though no explanation has been requested. Nina just nods, her expression inscrutable.

"I really admire your dedication to your instrument, Ephram," Nina tells him, voice neutral. "Honestly, I didn't know you had it in you."

Ephram coughs delicately at that and says, "It's amazing what you can accomplish when you put your mind to it."

"Mmm. Anyway, I won't keep you. Your dad just wanted me to tell

you that dinner's going to be ready in a few minutes," Nina tells him, her eyes drifting over his shoulder. She gives Bright, ruddy-cheeked and pacing in front of the piano, a small smile when he waves at her. "You're welcome to stay, Bright. One more person shouldn't make a difference."

"Uh..." Ephram says, but Bright pipes up, "Thanks, Nina!" She ignores the look Ephram shoots him and nods.

"Great!" she says. "I'll go set another place." She pauses, and gives Ephram one last quick once over and says, sotto voce, "Oh! Just one last thing -"

Ephram hides his impatience as best as he can. "What's that?"

"You might want to zip your pants up before you come to the table."

End Notes

Thanks to **lierdumoa** for her beta and prodding. If you're interested in what these songs all sound like, you can listen to snippets of all of them on Amazon.com. And the line "It's just a simple melody/ with nothing fancy, nothing much/ A Schubert tune with a Gershwin touch" is from the lyrics of "Prelude to a Kiss" written by Duke Ellington.

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